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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/RPM AND EUR/CE JAMIE LAMORE

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TAGS: MARR MCAP PGOV PREL AF HU
SUBJECT: HUNGARIAN DEFENSE MINISTER'S MEETING WITH
AMBASSADOR

REF: BUDAPEST 1103 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: P/E Counselor Eric Gaudiosi, reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C/NF) Summary. Hungarian Minister of Defense Imre Szekeres outlined key financial aspects of the Hungarian National Military Strategy in meeting with Ambassador on November 21. Highlighting the current Government's commitment to increase the Defense budget over the next five years, Szekeres acknowledged the challenges he faces in avoiding a 10 billion forint (50 million dollar) budget cut due to the current fiscal crisis in Hungary. That said, the Minister confirmed the Hungarian commitment to continue their PRT operations in Afghanistan, as well as deploying a joint Hungarian-Ohio National Guard Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team and Special Forces in early 2009. Szekeres also informed the Ambassador of upcoming senior leadership changes, with Lt General Tombol soon to be announced as the new Chief of Defense, replacing General Andras Havril in January 2009. End summary.

¶2. (C/NF) In a November 21 meeting with Ambassador Foley, Hungarian Minister of Defense (MOD) Imre Szekeres focused on two main issues: the Hungarian National Military Strategy (NMS) and planning for Afghanistan in 2009. Szekeres noted that this is the first-ever National Military Strategy for Hungary. Developed by a group of civilian experts lead by Istvan Gyarmati (Note: Gyarmati served as a State Secretary in the MOD in the 1990s and now heads the International Center for Democratic Transition in Budapest. End note), the Minister said he will present it to the relevant Parliamentary committees in December and to the Government in January. Szekeres stressed that a key element of the NMS relates to financing. He made reference to Prime Minister Gyurcsany's commitment at the October informal Defense Ministerial in Budapest to increase the Hungarian defense budget by 0.2 percent over the next five years, beginning in ¶2009. This planned increase would raise the MOD's GDP share from 1.11 percent to 1.31 percent by 2013.

¶3. (C/NF) Referring to the first budget vote in Parliament on November 25, Szekeres said he is talking to the Government about having more flexibility in spending. He noted that some in Parliament want to cut the MOD budget by 10 Billion forints (approximately 50 million USD,) with the opposition asking for instance, "why doesn't the Hungarian Military provide their own installation security instead of contract, civilian guards?" Calling this a "stupid proposal," Szekeres noted that they currently spend eight million forints (40,000 USD) a year for civilian guards rather than the approximately 15 million forints (75,000 USD) for active-duty military guards. Hopeful that he won't lose the 10 billion forints, Szekeres said he wants "more elbow room to continue to

develop projects and make technological improvements." (Comment. With the current financial crisis and fiscal constraints associated with the IMF, EU and World Bank support package (reftel) questions remain as to when the current budget negotiations in Parliament will sustain the Prime Minister's commitment. Although, as MFA NATO Department Chief Peter Sztaray noted to PolOff on November 17, Minister Szekeres' relationship with Prime Minister Gyurcsany is strong enough to argue for continued support, competing pressures associated with reductions in social services may force the MOD to face cuts as well. End comment.)

¶4. (C/NF) Turning to Afghanistan, Szekeres confirmed Hungary's commitment to keep their PRT in Baghlan Province in 2009, which is now augmented with 30 additional soldiers for increased security. (Comment. MFA sources state that the Government will propose to extend the PRT beyond 2009 at a meeting of the five-party leadership in early January. End comment.) Szekeres stated that on January 23 the first Hungarian Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) will jointly deploy with the Ohio National Guard to Baghlan Province to train an infantry kandak. The Minister said that this OMLT will be fully operational within six months and will then be ready to deploy wherever the kandak goes. While initial plans called for the OMLT to deploy to Uruzgan Province with the Dutch, Szekeres commented that the Dutch Chief of Defense (CHOD) informed the Hungarian CHOD November 20 that there will not be a kandak available in Uruzgan until August 2009. Continuing, Szekeres said that when the Afghan kandak is ready, Hungary will deploy their second OMLT. However, he commented that "the second OMLT is not ready," and he asked the Ambassador for assistance. Stating "it is

not an issue of money or training -- the money is there," Szekeres said that the problem is procurement and access to the material needed for this kandak. If the material gets here, "we will be ready in August." (Note. The Office of Defense Cooperation in Budapest is currently coordinating with the Defense Security Cooperation Agency to work the equipment issue committed through Coalition Support Funds program. End Note.)

¶5. (C/NF) Focusing on the Hungarian Special Forces (SF) deployment, Minister Szekeres said they are ready and at full capacity. Reflecting the very personal relationship between senior leadership and the troops in a relatively small military force of 23,000, Szekeres, noting the sensitive nature of this SF deployment, said he will meet soon with the SF troops and their leadership, commenting "I want to make sure they are all prepared; I need to check and double check their equipment, gear and training."

¶6. (C/NF) The Ambassador took the opportunity to thank Minister Szekeres for his efforts on a plan to increase defense spending. Expressing appreciation for Hungary's OMLT commitment, the Ambassador noted that the Ohio National Guard is ready and this joint deployment will be a model for NATO. Continuing, she highlighted Secretary Gates' concern about a two-tiered NATO -- those that do and those that don't -- commenting that the SF deployment to Afghanistan without caveats is a huge plus, a signal to NATO and the U.S. that Hungary is willing to do heavy lifting.

¶7. (C/NF) In closing, the Minister informed the Ambassador that Lt General Laszlo Tombol, currently the Joint Forces Commander, will be announced as the new Hungarian CHOD within the next two weeks, noting that the President and Prime Minister have both agreed, as well as all five political parties. Formal approval will come after Parliamentary hearings in December. In the interest of continuity Szekeres said that the current Deputy CHOD, General Mikita, will remain. The current CHOD, General Havril will leave his post by mid-January 2009 and move on to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Ambassador to Slovenia. Replacing Tombol at the Joint Forces Command will be Major General Benko, currently the Hungarian Land Forces Commander.

Foley